

Coming Up for Air by kisahawklin

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Summary:

A couple of days after the climax of the second season; set before the epilogue (school dance). Nancy and Jonathan and Steve figure stuff out.

Coming Up for Air

Author's Note:

- For [alpacapanache](#).

Sorry it's late, @alpacapanache! I hope it was worth the wait. Thanks as ever to @saekhwa who is the world's best cheerleader. <3

Steve drives the kids back to Jonathan and Will's house. He doesn't really have it together enough to do anything else. He knows the dogs-things (demo-dogs, he can hear Dustin's voice say – and he's starting to wonder if maybe he has some brain damage from all this shit) must have gone to where Hopper and Eleven went but he's fairly certain if superpower girl and shotgun sheriff can't handle them, there's nothing he and the kids can do but die, and he promised Nancy he would take care of her pain in the ass little brother.

They're through. He knows that; he's known it since she got drunk and was honest with him for the first time in... maybe their whole relationship. He's not entirely sure he blames her. At least some of that, if not all of it, is his fault.

He can't say he likes the fact that Jonathan just stepped right up to fill his space, but he and Nancy have always been close because of their brothers. Steve doesn't have the sibling card to play, though he thinks playing babysitter might have earned him at least one new younger sibling.

The Byers and Nancy show up next. Will is up and walking, which is a hell of a lot better than he was doing when Hopper bundled him up and put him in the car earlier.

They sit in tense silence, all hoping they'll hear from the last two of their ragtag band and also that Billy doesn't wake up and cause trouble. Nance keeps sneaking looks at him and he's fairly certain it's not because he's looking his usual handsome self. Jonathan keeps glaring at him, but if Steve's guess is right, Jonathan and Nancy haven't really talked about anything and he probably feels insecure.

Steve feels remarkably grown-up for thinking that. Then his head hurts because fuck, he can't seem to win a fight to save his life. Maybe he should take some fucking boxing lessons.

"Are you okay?" Nancy asks, finally, and everyone turns to look at him, including Will's mom, who had been extremely preoccupied with her younger son until that point.

"I'm fine," Steve says, but unfortunately for him, he sounds like he's drunk.

"You probably have a concussion," Joyce says, up and at his side in two seconds flat. "Let me see you."

He's almost positive that Joyce works at the hardware store and isn't a registered nurse, but she's a mom, and moms know all kinds of weird shit about injuries, so he lets her look at him. She turns his head from side to side and does something with a flashlight in both his eyes and his head pounds some more.

"Did those dog things do this to you?" she asks, and he can't help either the laugh that comes out or the fact that it sounds high-pitched and on the verge of hysteria.

"No," he says, nodding his head at Billy. "He did it."

Her eyes scoot over to Billy and go really, really wide, like she hadn't quite pieced together the fact that there was an unconscious teenager on her floor. He can't blame her; it's been a hell of a night.

"Oh," she says quietly. "And... he will wake up eventually?"

Steve nods. "He was threatening Lucas, and when I stepped up, this happened," he gestures at his face, "so his sister gave him one of those shots you were giving Will."

Joyce's eyes get wide and she scans the room, looking for, Steve presumes, Max. Before she can say anything, though, Hopper comes in, carrying Eleven in his arms. She's still and is bleeding from her nose, which seems to be her M.O.

Mike is out of his chair like a shot, dancing around Hopper while

Chief tries to elbow him away from her. She shifts and groans, and Mike finally lets Hopper through, trailing him into the living room.

"Up. Now."

All the kids sitting on the couch immediately stand up and back off, staring at Hopper like everyone else in the room. He sits down heavily and pulls El firmly into his arms, cradling her. Mike pulls one of the cushions off the back of the couch and stuffs it under Hopper's arm which makes him visibly relax and definitely makes Eleven seem more like she's sleeping and less like she's unconscious or dying or both.

"Let me see her," Joyce says, all no-nonsense like she was with him.

"Did she do it?" Steve asks. Everyone glares at him, but it's one of those things – if it's the end of the world, he doesn't want to be babysitting a bunch of kids for his final hours.

"Yeah," Hopper says. "It's closed. It took a lot out of her."

Well duh. Mike's now sitting at Hopper's feet and the ragtag band of nerds follow suit, just behind him.

"No," Joyce says emphatically. "Will, get in bed. The rest of you can sleep in Will's room or on the floor out here. I'll grab the extra blankets and sleeping bags."

Steve helps. Apparently he cares about these kids now. He herds them, letting Mike and Max sleep out with Hopper and Eleven and arranging Dustin and Lucas on the floor in Will's room. They're all out the second their heads hit the pillows. The hallway is empty when he closes Will's door, and he's just about to call it a night when he hears Nancy whisper.

"Steve."

He rolls his eyes. The only rooms she could be in are Joyce's or Jonathan's, and it doesn't take advanced trig to figure out which one it is. He debates ignoring it, going down the hallway and out to his car and back to his lonely bed in his lonely house... and he immediately dismisses the idea and moves further down the hall and

pushes Jonathan's door open a few more inches, peeking around the corner.

They're curled up in bed together, clothes still on, right down to their shoes. Something about that is comforting, even as his heart lurches at the sight of Jonathan spooned up behind Nancy, in a way he never got to cuddle with her. They never had the opportunity to spend the night together, and Steve regrets it. He regrets it a lot.

"Steve, come here," Nancy says, patting the bed next to her.

It's not weird. He's just tucked in six pre-pubescent kids and two adults; it's not weird to not want to be alone after an experience like that. Just thinking about his empty house makes him want to puke.

Still, it's not his place anymore. He always had a feeling Nancy and Jonathan would get together; their relationship always was just the other side of 'friendly.' Steve ignored it because he trusted Nancy, and jealous as he might be right this second, he is certain nothing happened until they broke up.

"You're not going to that big old empty house," Jonathan says. "Lay down."

There's a smart remark on the tip of his tongue, but Jonathan scoots backwards and pulls Nancy back against him to make some room on the bed, and it sticks in Steve's throat. "Thanks," he says, quietly moving to the side of the bed and lying down on his side, not too close to Nancy. His knees are tucked up and his head pillowied on his arm and the relief he feels lasts only for a few seconds because he falls asleep as soon as he closes his eyes.

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There's some jostling that shifts things at some point; Steve turns over and has a vague impression of staring at Nancy, both their eyes open. He's super tired, though, and it isn't until he's being forcibly pushed into the middle of the bed that he realizes their sleeping arrangements have become a Steve sandwich, and Jonathan has slung an arm over his chest.

He's not awake enough to have any coherent thoughts about it except "I'm kinda warm" and then throws his arm over Nancy, too, because it's just more comfortable that way.

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He doesn't dream. He's glad of that.

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Joyce doesn't bat an eye when she knocks on the door and comes in the next morning. "Up and at 'em," she says, throwing a dishtowel at Jonathan. "I need you to make eggs."

Steve's mouth answers before his brain is even functioning. "I can make pancakes," he says. It's the one thing his mom taught him, and a trick he'd been waiting to spring on Nancy the first time she could stay over.

"Great," Joyce says. "Bisquick's in the pantry. Jonathan can show you everything else."

Jonathan groans grumpily and rolls off the bed, giving Steve room to turn over and follow without waking Nancy. Apparently she can sleep through anything. He flips the comforter over her and follows Jonathan to the kitchen.

"Coffee?" Jonathan asks.

Steve recoils at the thought. Who the hell drinks coffee? Only the sad adults who need to stay awake through their boring-ass jobs drink coffee. "Nah, man. Milk and eggs for the pancakes. You got any juice?"

"No," Jonathan says, but when he goes to the fridge, he seems to stare at it in disbelief. "Uh, what kind of juice?" he asks.

Steve raises an eyebrow. He'd felt pretty shitty asking for it; it's not like Joyce had planned to have twelve people staying overnight in her house. He looks into the living room and sees that Hopper is conspicuously missing from the pile of kids and sleeping bags.

"Orange, of course," Steve answers, because it's embarrassing enough without having to make Jonathan list off the kinds of juice that have miraculously appeared in their fridge.

A glass of OJ is set down next to the bowl he's measuring Bisquick into, along with milk and eggs. Steve reads off the rest of the ingredients and Jonathan brings them all and measuring cups and spoons. Once he's confirmed Steve has everything he needs – silently, with nothing more than grunts of affirmation – he sets to cracking a dozen eggs into another bowl.

"How cute."

The hair on the back of Steve's neck stands up. Billy. He'd forgotten all about that asshole.

"You always cook with your boyfriend, Harrington?"

Steve puts a hand on Jonathan's arm to keep him from rising to the bait. There's no way Billy's going to do anything but crawl away with his tail between his legs after what Max did to him last night.

Billy comes up behind them, his entire presence threatening, and Jonathan turns to face him. Steve's not even sure Jonathan knows Billy; he's never been up on current events at the school. "What's your problem?"

It's almost as if he can feel the way Billy's laser focus switches from him to Jonathan. "Your boyfriend fighting your battles now?" Billy asks, and Steve rolls his eyes and finally turns to face him.

"No need for that, your little sister is right behind you."

Billy turns around so fast it makes Steve dizzy, and he can't help laughing. That is probably a mistake, because Billy turns around and takes a swing, clipping Jonathan.

Steve yanks Jonathan behind him, putting his arms out so he can keep himself as Billy's primary target. Billy laughs. "You looking for another beating like last night? You already look like pounded crap, but –"

The sound Billy makes is both horrifying and hilarious. Steve sees him yanked backwards by his collar and it takes a second to look up and realize the chief has him in one hand.

"You did this to him?" Hopper asks, nodding his head at Steve. "That's assault and battery."

Billy doesn't say anything, and for once looks honestly scared. Even with Max, he was really too stoned to be scared, and Steve should've realized Max's (admittedly awesome) display wouldn't stop anything.

"I bet you have a record, too," Hopper says, and shoves Billy toward the door. He stops just before he crosses the threshold and looks at the bowls Steve and Jonathan were working on before they were so rudely interrupted. "Pancakes?" he asks.

"Yeah," Steve answers. "You coming back?"

"Hell yeah," Hopper says. "I'll just throw this jackass in a holding cell to cool down for a while."

"Bring bacon!" Jonathan yells after him.

Steve laughs, clapping Jonathan on the back and going back to stirring the pancake batter. They work in silence for a while before Jonathan stutters his way through a question.

"Who... um, who was that guy?"

Steve shrugs. "An asshole. Max's step-brother."

"And he beat you up?"

Jonathan's eyes meet his for half a second and slide back to his eggs. It's not like he forgot that Jonathan beat the snot out of him, but there's a hell of a lot of distance between then and now. "Yep. 's the thing to do, apparently."

"I'm sorry," Jonathan says, before Steve can even get his joke all the way out. "I was out of line."

"Nah," Steve says, because he really wasn't. "I was. I'm sorry I was a

dick. I shouldn't've said that stuff."

Jonathan nods, going back to the eggs and beating furiously. Steve turns on the stove and dumps a ladleful of batter into a pan.

"You didn't care he called us boyfriends?" Jonathan asks.

The batter spreads slowly across the pan and Steve lets the question sit a little. Of course it doesn't bother him, they're not boyfriends, and Billy's a dick. Getting upset over it would just make him push on that button harder. "Why would I? We're not, right?"

It's meant to be a joke – and it is, really, Steve doesn't do guys, even if Jonathan is kinda queer. It only takes a second for him to realize that if Jonathan really is gay, then he might have just talked himself into a corner. He focuses on Nancy instead.

"I'm okay with you two, you know," he says. "Nancy deserves someone nice."

He stares down into the pan, watching for the telltale bubbles that tell him it's time to flip and waiting for Jonathan to say something.

"I'm not nice."

Steve pffts that one. Jonathan isn't anything *but* nice. Well, a little awkward maybe. "Dude, you're like, the nicest of the nice. It's kinda disgusting, actually."

He's pretty sure he's hitting the sweet spot with the jokes, but Jonathan's awkwardness sucks all the humor out of the conversation and it just keeps angling back to uncomfortable. He doesn't even know what to say anymore. It's time to flip the pancake so he concentrates on that instead of whatever the hell Jonathan is trying to say.

"Morning," Nancy says, her voice a little croaky. Steve closes his eyes briefly and thanks god for the distraction. She comes over and kisses Jonathan on the cheek, settling in at his side.

Little by little, Steve relaxes, expertly cooking the pancakes and putting them in the oven to keep warm, complete with tinfoil, like his

mom taught him. Hopper comes back halfway through the pancakes and they put on the bacon, and Steve's never been more grateful for pig products.

When he's maybe four pancakes from the end, Jonathan starts the eggs and Nancy sets the table, including the piles of toast she made and buttered, and then goes around waking up the kids.

It's funny, really. The kids all sit around the table, half awake, and the adults – yeah, he totally counts himself as an adult after all this shit – lean against counters with their plates, or sit on the couch.

The kids wake up as the sugar hits their system, and the high of being alive means there's a lot of chatter. Steve's never had a meal like it in his life. Suddenly it's the only kind of meal he ever wants to have.

It's noon before people start heading toward home. Jonathan drives Nancy, Mike, Max, Lucas, and Dustin home, and Steve stays to help Joyce do the dishes. He really can't deal with going to the empty mansion just yet.

"You really don't have to do this, you know?" Joyce says, handing him another plate to dry.

"I don't mind," Steve says mildly. He really doesn't. At this point he knows he's procrastinating and he just doesn't want to go home, but he doesn't have to tell Joyce that.

"Thank you for watching over the boys."

Steve grabs the mug she hands him and hums his acceptance of that. He doesn't even know what else he might have done. "I'm glad Will is all right."

Joyce huffs out a low laugh. "Me too," she says, handing over another plate. "Me too."

They do dishes in silence for a long while, and Steve's okay with that. He doesn't really have a lot to say about the last few weeks, or the last year, if he wants to go back that far.

"Bob wanted to move," Joyce says unexpectedly.

Steve keeps his eyes forward, concentrating on putting the silverware away. He has no idea what to say about that.

"He thought maybe we should move away from all this." Joyce just keeps handing over dishes and Steve stands around, listening and drying and wondering why the hell he wanted to do this instead of go home and shower in his own bathroom.

"But I couldn't. I can't take Will away from his friends. I can't take Jonathan away from you and Nancy."

The way she says it is easy, like things between the three of them are perfectly normal. He doesn't know what to say; he and Jonathan will never be bosom buddies, and Jonathan's dating his ex-girlfriend, and... he doesn't really know what he is to Nancy now. A friend? Are they friends? Can they be friends?

"I'm not..." he says, struggling with trying to put words to something he has no frame of reference for. Joyce stops washing dishes and looks at him shrewdly. He swallows hard.

"You're not what?" she asks. She looks him in the eyes and doesn't blink and he doesn't dare look away because he has a feeling Joyce is not someone you look away from.

He swallows again. "We're not a thing. I'm not... it's just Jonathan and Nancy. I'm just Nancy's dickhead ex."

Joyce looks over his face, bringing a hand up to the bruises around his eyes, brushing his hair away from them gently. "If you say so," she says. "But I think my son might disagree, and probably Nancy too."

The idea is terrifying. But considering what he went through last night, on a scale of one to giant monster under a field and a pack of demo-dogs, it's really only around a three.

"It doesn't bother you?" he asks. Because if anyone was going to be upset about it, shouldn't it be Jonathan's mom? Shouldn't her son being gay cause a problem? Or even just... "sharing" Nancy, if that's a thing they could do?

"What?" she asks. "That Jonathan might like boys? Or that maybe the

three of you fit better together than any two of you apart?"

Steve stares at her, but she's draining the sink and hanging the washcloth over the faucet. Moving around the kitchen and putting boxes and bottles back in their place.

"I'm a child of the sixties, Steve. No part of that equation is something I worry about. I worry about my son getting his heart broken. I worry about him having two people that might do that instead of one."

Now she turns and stares him straight in the eyes. "I worry that you don't like boys and he'll have to pretend that it doesn't hurt him."

"*I don't* like boys," Steve says, but his voice sounds kind of dead.

Joyce gets a little wrinkle between her brows. "Have you tried one?"

The laugh that comes out of him is sudden and harsh. "Of course not! I'm not a queer."

His voice falters again at the end and Joyce raises an eyebrow. "I'd watch your mouth, mister. I'm not always this sweet and nice, and I don't like the way you talk about queers."

Steve takes a shallow breath. "Sorry. It's... uh..." He looks away. "Reflex. I don't mean it."

Joyce grabs his chin and forces him to look at her. He winces at her fingers pressing into the bruises on his jaw. "Learn to control your bullshit impulses, Steve. It'll work out better for your face, too."

"Yes, ma'am."

She sighs and sits down heavily in a chair at the table. "Maybe you should try it," she says. "You never know. You might like it."

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Steve leaves before Jonathan gets back; he doesn't want to be around him without Nancy as the buffer.

He goes home, takes a long, hot shower, and stumbles into his own bed, falling asleep hard and having weird dreams that leave him out of sorts when he wakes up.

He takes another hot shower after he wakes up, more out of habit than anything, but he spends half an hour under the hot spray, just staring at the wall opposite him, hearing Joyce's words.

I worry about Jonathan having two people that might break his heart instead of one.

There's something weirdly fragile about it. He's almost certain he couldn't have broken Nancy's heart. That she never really was into him enough for that to happen. She broke his heart, for sure. It was a slow process, so it was more like gradually peeling back a bandaid than ripping it off. And he'd been weirdly happy for her to have Jonathan in the end. He likes that she's happy.

But to have that power over someone else. It's so different from the way he'd tried to break Jonathan with his hurtful words and gotten himself beaten up for his trouble. Maybe it wasn't the words that had pissed Jonathan off, but that the fact that *he* was the one to say them.

He doesn't really believe that – at least it doesn't feel true to what happened – but there's still something fascinating about it. It's easier to look at something like that than the way he woke up this morning, or the way he and Jonathan moved around the kitchen together.

It's completely foreign to him. He has no idea what gays do. Do they go on dates? Who brings the flowers? Who pays?

And then there's Nancy. It's the damn math he can't get, arithmetic of $1 + 1 + 1 =$ what, exactly? There's geometry, too. He can't figure out the shape of this thing. He doesn't know where he fits. Where anyone fits, really. And there's no way Nancy and Jonathan have even considered something like this, much less talked about it, amidst the nightmare of the last few days.

Finally, he knows what to do. Jesus, it's so easy when you know what to do! He shuts off the water, dries off and does his hair with a purpose. He calls Nancy, puts on the shirt she always liked on him

while he sets up a meet at the local Dairy Queen.

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She buys their ice cream.

Steve had wanted to pay but she had her cash ready and handed it over while Steve was still fishing his wallet out of his back pocket. The cashier looks embarrassed but takes the money and gives Nancy her exact change.

"I could've bought the ice cream," he jokes, elbowing her.

She shrugs, smiling up at him. "I know."

It's like Jonathan's awkwardness rubbed off on her. Before, she would've said something funny, joked around and made Steve put on a pretend offended face. Is this what he wants? The death of humor in his life? They can't *possibly* stay awkward forever, can they? Nancy loosened up after a couple of months of them dating.

"So, Joyce and I had a talk this morning." Steve leads the way into the back, sits in the booth closest to the back door.

"That's nice. Joyce is really cool."

Nancy has always had a really demure way of eating ice cream. Steve could watch her do it for hours. "Yeah," he agrees. "Will and Jonathan are lucky to have her."

"Mmm hmm," Nancy hums, licking stripes around the ice cream. Steve stares until she catches him watching and lowers the cone. "And what did you and Joyce talk about?"

Steve looks around, making sure no one is within earshot. "She kinda..."

Nancy looks interested, but not overly curious, or worried. If she's getting any of his nerves, he doesn't see it. She goes back to licking her ice cream, her eyes on his the whole time.

Steve licks his lips and looks down at his own melting ice cream. He takes a big chunk off the top, stalling. Trying to put words to all this. Nancy just holds his eyes, eating her ice cream, and the slight nausea subsides.

"She said maybe Jonathan likes me."

It's definitely a surprise. Not a complete surprise, there's no loud gasp and hand to her mouth, but her eyes are wide open and she stops eating.

"So... what part of that is a surprise, and what part did you know about?"

Oh, *now* she lowers her eyes. She stares down at her ice cream, picking at the wrapper around the cone. "I only guessed. From... last year, really. Jonathan's had a crush on me for a while, I think, but after the whole monster thing..."

She looks up at him, her eyes worried, like she's afraid of something. "I'd bring you up and he... his reaction was different. He tried to make it the same. Tried to make it seem like he didn't like you, but... I could tell. He was scared."

Steve takes a minute to sit with that. He has so many questions. "You didn't think it was weird?"

She shrugs, still picking at the wrapper. "I liked you. It's easy to see how someone else could."

"Yeah, but *Jonathan*?" Steve's not a dick, especially not after he's seen the kind of asshole Billy is, but it's not like they know any gay guys around here. It's not something he ever would have come up with on his own.

She shrugs. "You called him queer. That day by the movie theater. It's not like people haven't said things his whole life."

He frowns. Shit, he was a real asshole. How could Jonathan possibly like him after that?

Nancy reaches out a hand, setting it on his wrist gently. "He knows

you were just lashing out because you were hurt." She squeezes once and lets go. "I do too."

That doesn't actually make him feel any better. "It was still a dick move."

"Yeah," she says. "But you're not like that anymore. And Jonathan can see that just as clearly as I can. You should believe it too."

He thinks it's probably going to be a while before that happens. "I... don't know what to do," he says. His one big move was to talk to Nancy, but now it's all questions and awkwardness and no one knows anything, particularly what the hell to do next.

Nancy leans back in her chair, going back to licking her ice cream cone, thoughtful. Steve lets her think because he sure as hell doesn't know what to do, and Nancy's always been the one with a plan.

"Okay," Nancy says, scooting out of the booth. She stands next to the table, staring down at him. "Well? You coming?"

He is so confused. "What? Where?"

Her smile is somehow both impish and wicked, and he's not sure he trusts this version of Nancy.

"To talk to Jonathan, of course."

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He's not surprised to see Joyce, Will, and Jonathan on the couch watching movies when they knock. The kids had cleaned the place pretty well before they left yesterday, and there was no way any of them were going to school today. He wonders what the principals think when there's just a bunch of kids that don't show up for school one day with no notice.

Jonathan opens the door, looking between him and Nancy nervously. "Hey."

"Hey," Nancy says, leaning in and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "We

need to talk to you."

Jonathan swallows and licks his lips, not moving from in front of the door.

"Invite them in!" Joyce yells. "We're watching Star Trek!"

Jonathan shuffles to the side and lowers his eyes. His shoulders are up around his ears, and he's never looked more uncomfortable – and that's in a history of looking extremely uncomfortable, all the time.

"Hi, Mrs. Byers," Nancy says as she steps in. "We just need to talk to Jonathan."

Steve can't even see into the house, but the flurry of noise is unsettling as hell. A moment later, there are heavy footsteps coming their way. "Can I get the big popcorn?" Will is asking as he's shoved through the door by Joyce.

"Yes," she says, and Steve has a feeling he has been manipulated, somehow. Joyce puts a hand on his shoulder briefly, and he thinks he might have stopped to hug her if they hadn't been in such a rush.

Jonathan shuts the door and they wander into the living room. Steve stands, waiting, to see where he should sit. There's really only the couch unless they want to sit at the table in the kitchen. Jonathan takes one end of the couch and Steve's decided he'll either stand or just sit cross-legged on the floor when Nancy takes his hand and pushes him down on the other end of the couch. She takes a seat on the low coffee table they have, halfway between them.

It takes a few tries for all of them to get comfortable. Jonathan looks like he's trying to melt into the end of the couch and Nancy gets up to push the coffee table back a few feet before sitting back down, one leg tucked under her. Steve sits forward, one arm on the arm rest, but he can barely talk to Nancy that way; there's no way he'll be able to talk to Jonathan. He shifts, puts his back against the arm and faces Jonathan, bringing one knee up so he doesn't look like he's riding side-saddle.

Something about that makes Jonathan relax, and he at least stops

trying to be one with the couch, shifting his eyes over at Steve briefly and returning them to his hands in his lap.

Steve makes a mental bet with himself that Nancy will be the first to speak. He know it won't be him, and he puts the odds at ninety-ten in favor of Nancy. She's the only one who doesn't seem completely freaked out about all this.

He's wrong; he's kind of glad he didn't name stakes.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" Jonathan asks, looking up at Steve for a full second before looking at Nancy.

Steve's not 100% on that, and Nancy is the one that dragged him here, so he figures she's going to get the ball rolling. She gives him the eyebrow, though, the one that says, 'go on, say it' like Steve has any idea what 'it' is.

"Uh," Steve says, stalling. "I don't know?"

Jonathan chuckles, low. "Well, I guess that's better than I thought."

Steve and Nancy both turn to stare at Jonathan, and he immediately avoids their eyes to pick at invisible lint on his jeans. "What? I half expected you to tell me you were back together. And that was the best of the available options."

It makes Steve cringe. He doesn't have a fully formed idea of what Jonathan's *worse* than 'break-up and by the way we're getting back together' might be, but he's mostly thankful for that, and willing not to poke it with a stick.

"No," Nancy says, and that's the first that Steve realizes that haven't actually nixed Jonathan's idea.

"Well," Steve says, "not *exactly*." Because he doesn't have a solid shape of this in his mind, but if it does involve all three of them, that means him and Nancy will be sort of together again.

Jonathan's eyebrows go up at that, and he meets Steve's eyes for a long second and then tilts his head at Nancy, like she's the one to explain.

It's fair, he supposes.

"No," Nancy says firmly. "It's entirely different."

Steve's not so sure about that, but the Nancy part of the equation is the only part that makes sense to him. He loves Nancy, Jonathan loves Nancy, that's easy. Except Jonathan might like him, which is weird – gay guys like girls too?

He almost wants to say something, but he hears Joyce in his head, *Learn to control your bullshit impulses, Steve*, and decides it's probably not a good question.

"Do you like me?" Steve blurts out. It seems like the basic question; both Joyce and Nancy had seemed fairly certain, but Steve is still having a hard time wrapping his head around it.

Jonathan rolls his eyes. "Well, you're less of an asshole than you used to be."

It makes him laugh. It's true. Not entirely – apparently he still has some basic asshole tendencies, if his conversation with Joyce is any indication – but it's good to know someone noticed. "Thanks, I think."

A flash of a smile, just a brief glimpse, crosses Jonathan's face, and Steve is stunned. Jonathan has never smiled around him. He doesn't think he's *ever* seen Jonathan smile, certainly never in school. He suddenly wants to make Jonathan smile again.

"That's not what I meant, though," Steve says. "And I think you know it."

Jonathan goes back to picking imaginary lint, shaking his head a little.

"No, you don't like me like that?" Steve presses. "Or no, you think I'll be an asshole if you admit you do?"

It's not flattering, having Jonathan react with such huge surprise at his words. He never meant to be a jerk, but apparently intentions aren't everything, because every time he calls himself out, people are surprised.

Jonathan looks over at Nancy with the same big eyes and Steve doesn't know what to do with that.

"It's okay," Nancy says. "Everything's okay."

Oh, wait wait wait – full stop! This is still about all three of them, right? This isn't about – "No, wait," Steve says, turning to Nancy. "This isn't about you guys breaking up, right? You didn't say anything about that."

Nancy reaches out to pat his wrist. "No. No one's breaking up. This is about more, not less."

He blows out a breath. Okay, good. Because shit, for a minute there –

"Yeah," Jonathan says haltingly. "I kinda like you."

Shit. For a minute there, Steve thought this was about him and Jonathan being gay boyfriends.... and now he realizes that even with Nancy there, it still kinda *is* and he's not gay, so how does this all work? If Jonathan is gay, why does he like Nancy? None of this makes any sense!

Steve swallows. He was feeling okay, or at least not not-okay. But suddenly this feels dangerous in some way he can't understand and that makes him extremely nervous. "So you *are* gay?" Steve asks, knowing as soon as it's out of his mouth that it was the wrong thing because of the way Jonathan goes back to trying to melt into the arm of the couch.

"No," Jonathan says flatly.

"But," Steve starts, and then changes his mind when Joyce's words echo in his mind again. "It's not a bad thing," Steve says instead. He doesn't know a lot of gay people but he doesn't think it's that terrible. "I just... you like boys, right? Doesn't that make you gay?"

Jonathan rolls his eyes again, which is better than him trying to disappear, Steve supposes. "I like girls, too," he says, tilting his head pointedly at Nancy.

"I... I don't understand," Steve says. Seriously, how can you like both

boys and girls?

Jonathan shakes his head. "It's called bisexual," he says, and it's not a hard word to understand, but it's not one Steve's ever heard before, and he still can't quite grasp the concept.

It's easiest when he thinks about sex, probably, because he knows how much he wanted that, right from the start, with Nancy. He can't imagine something like that with a guy – any guy, but definitely not Jonathan who is sitting right there looking angry instead of uncomfortable for a change.

Angry? Why angry?

"Did I piss you off?" Steve asks, because he knows he did, he just doesn't know why.

"Yeah," Jonathan says, and this is another thing he's never seen Jonathan be, angry and disappointed and maybe a little hurt. It's like discover Jonathan day. "There's nothing wrong with me."

Steve puts his hands up. "I didn't say there was!"

He maybe thought it, but he didn't say anything. "I'm just trying to understand. I like touching Nancy," Steve says. He doesn't go for sex because he thinks Jonathan might actually still be a virgin, and it seems like –

"Me too," Jonathan says.

Okay then. "But you want to..." Steve flops his hands around to try and indicate the mess that is making out or whatever. "...with me too?"

"Yeah," Jonathan says, looking mad and kind of determined, the way he was when Steve walked in on him and Nancy trying to lure the monster to the Byers' house. "I know exactly how I want to touch you."

Steve's mind goes absolutely blank.

How. What.

Jonathan looks pissed off again, and he gets up to pace behind Nancy. "Why'd you even ask if it grosses you out so much? Just to call me a queer again?"

Well, you are a queer, Steve thinks and immediately recognizes it as something *not* to say. "It doesn't gross me out," he says instead, and it's the truth. He remembers making fun of that stuff with his friends when they were kids, but only because it was weird, not because it was gross.

"Right," Jonathan says. "You wouldn't freak out if I tried to kiss you right now."

Well, he probably would. But not because he thinks it's gross. Maybe.

"He's a really good kisser," Nancy adds, nodding earnestly like she's trying to be helpful.

Steve turns to stare at Nancy. When the hell did they have time for kissing? And... does that mean she thinks Jonathan's a better kisser than Steve is?

Steve's inner Joyce keeps him from harping on it, and there's a question still hanging in the air that Steve knows he has to answer. His stomach is starting to roll, and he can feel the way his skin prickles at the idea of whatever might happen next.

He can't be less brave than Jonathan, though, so he swallows the nausea and shrugs. "Of course not."

Jonathan smiles again, and for half a second it makes Steve happy to see it – until it turns into something almost predatory, and Jonathan moves around Nancy to sit on the couch, as close to Steve as he can.

It's a challenge, Steve can see the defiance in the way Jonathan looks at him, like a defender planting his feet. It's Steve's move, so he shifts forward, getting his leg out from between them, lets himself get close enough to Jonathan that they could kiss.

Jonathan's eyes drop down to his mouth and Steve feels his stomach plummet. He huffs out a breath, surprised at the shift in the mood, from confusing and awkward to... this. Anticipation? Maybe.

When Jonathan's eyes come back up to his, and for just a second, Steve's scared at what he might see there. He's still afraid, a little. Jonathan doesn't look afraid at all. He looks hungry, and Steve's breath catches again, because this is all so strange but he can't move, he has to know what happens next.

In a move Steve never would have suspected, Jonathan raises his hand to Steve's neck. His fingers are cool and strong, and Steve's mouth drops open a little in surprise.

Jonathan shifts forward then, his eyes back on Steve's mouth. Steve wets his lips and Jonathan makes some kind of primal noise before moving all the way in, bringing himself into the kiss with his whole body, pressing Steve back against the arm of the couch.

The kiss itself is breathtaking. Steve's used to thinking a lot when he's kissing; it's all about managing not to have too much tongue and trying to see how far you can get in feeling someone up, but this is not like that at all. This is just Jonathan showing him how it's going to be, and Steve following his lead because there is nothing else to do.

There's a soft touch on his wrist, and his scrambled brain takes a minute to realize it must be Nancy. She lifts his hand to Jonathan's back, and Steve automatically curls his fist in Jonathan's shirt.

Something in Jonathan changes then, pressing his advantage, surging forward against Steve, and Steve melts under the onslaught. Jesus, Jonathan is a better kisser than him and fuck, this is not what he signed on for, but he can't help pulling Jonathan even closer, encouraging whatever the hell this is.

Jonathan breaks away suddenly, breathing hard. Steve's too stunned to breathe, so maybe Jonathan's breathing for both of them. He wants more, though, so he pulls on Jonathan's shirt, his hands still fisted in it, and Jonathan looks up at him and smiles, completely guileless, and Steve can feel everything in his body rearrange itself, like it's gone into the Upside-Down.

"Nance," Jonathan says, taking his hand off Steve's neck, which is not cool, hey, bring that back! Except he's just reaching it out to Nancy,

who takes it, and slides herself onto Steve's lap with ease.

Jonathan kisses her – just a little, nothing like the life-changing whatever the hell Steve got, but he supposes she got her epiphany a while ago – and grabs Steve's hands, guiding them to Nancy's waist.

Steve hangs on for dear life, because Jonathan puts his hand on Steve's neck again, and Steve blinks in slow motion, his eyes suddenly too heavy to stay open. When Jonathan kisses him this time, he simply surrenders. His questions all fall away, he doesn't care about anything except his fingers on Nancy's skin and Jonathan's mouth on his.

"Like that, do you?" Nancy asks, and wiggles her butt a little, which makes Steve realize he's hard. Like, really hard. Like, kinda wanting to get naked right now, hard.

He glances down at his watch. Shit, they've been talking for an hour! Joyce and the brat will be home in less than an hour, and he's just not ready to try and rush things yet. He supposes they can just make out on the couch for a while... guess he'll just go home and take a cold shower after.

"Stop thinking so much," Nancy says, and Jonathan chuckles, kissing Nancy again. Steve wants to kiss Nancy too, but he's not really sure how this works, which brings him back to thinking about the three of them naked on a bed together and his mind shorts out the same way it did when Jonathan talked about kissing him, but considering how well that turned out, he's willing to take a chance.

Nancy gets up, presses Jonathan back, and sits in his lap instead, facing Steve. Jonathan puts an arm around her waist, and when she leans forward into Steve's space, it gives her something to hang onto. Steve stares at it for a second before bringing his eyes up to Nancy's face and registering her mischievous smile. He's always in trouble when he sees that sparkle in her eye.

"My turn," she says, and moves as far forward as she can, batting her eyelashes outrageously. Steve rolls his eyes but meets her halfway, bringing his hand up to her face because he always likes to touch her face.

In the wake of Jonathan's kiss, it's different than any other time he's kissed her. They'd definitely had a few sweet kisses in their time, but most of their kisses were a little bit desperate. They never had enough time together, it was always stolen and hurried and hidden. Here they don't have to do that, though. He can take his time, he can kiss her the way he wants to and touch her face and something about it makes him short of breath.

When he pulls away, Jonathan is looking at him thoughtfully. "You still love Nancy."

Well, duh. They only broke up a few days ago, you don't stop loving someone that fast. He just raises an eyebrow. *Come on, dude.*

"Nance?" Jonathan asks.

Nancy shrugs. "Yeah. I mean, I was trying to get myself ready to get over him. But I hadn't really started yet."

Jonathan hums, resting his forehead on the back of Nancy's head. Steve's not sure what that means, but he doesn't think it's good. He's not sure what or how to ask, though.

"Stop thinking in twos," Nancy says. "We know how each of us work as a pair. We need to figure out how we work as a trio."

She hops off of Jonathan's lap and holds her hands out to both of them. "Come on."

They both take her hand and let her tug them up off the couch, leading the way down the hall to Jonathan's room. She slips her shoes off just inside the door, and Steve follows suit because it seems rude not to.

Jonathan's not wearing shoes so it's easy for him, and he goes to sit on the bed, looking up at Steve and Nancy. He looks at home, which he is, so that makes sense, really, but it's not something Steve's ever seen. He doesn't look uncomfortable or awkward for once in his life, and when Nancy tackles him and wiggles them to the top of the bed, Steve has the strangest mix of feelings he's ever had in his life. He's jealous, though he can't tell of who, and he's happy for them – they

both obviously feel comfortable and safe – and there's also a little pity party going on because he doesn't know what to do now, or where he fits in. Or if he fits in, really.

"Come on," Jonathan says, shoving himself back a little to make some space in the middle. Nancy backs herself to the other edge of the bed and there's now a gulf in the middle, a huge space for Steve to crawl into.

The mix of feelings shift into something warmer, less confused, but there's still the awkwardness of trying to figure out which way to face. He doesn't want to give either of them his back. He flops onto his front in between them, keeping his face in the pillows because he just wants someone to tell him what to do. All this decision-making is exhausting. Is this what adulthood is? He'll give it back, then. No thanks.

He can feel both of them scoot closer, and it isn't until Nancy rests her head on the back of his shoulder that he realizes exactly what position he's looking for. He bobbles Nancy's head until she lifts it and flips himself over onto his back, snaking his arm around Nancy's back as she curls up with her head on his shoulder, and, after a minute of apparent indecision on Jonathan's part, he does the same to him when he finally curls up on Steve's other side.

It's perfectly comfortable, all in all, and it reminds him of how they were curled up last night and all he could think was, "warm." He closes his eyes and sighs. It's all probably going to be okay.

"Hey," Nancy says, and Steve doesn't even open his eyes, just hums his answers. "Your parents going to be home next weekend?"

Steve snorts and feels both their heads bobble. This is great. "You know they're gone for the month."

"Great," she says, setting a hand on top of the one Jonathan's currently resting on Steve's stomach. "We're coming over."

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